



The Perilous Voyage across the Atlantic Ocean

Perilous Voyage

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By 1600, people had been traveling by sea for centuries, yet sailing long distances still was a very dangerous, uncertain venture. Pirates lurked along the coasts, ready to prey upon vessels carrying valuable cargo, so ships often traveled in fleets for protection.

Since all sailing vessels relied on wind power, everything depended on the weather: A voyage across the Atlantic Ocean could take anywhere from six weeks to six months! For example, because of unfavorable winds, the three ships that sailed from England for the New World in December 1606 still were within sight of England's coast after six weeks. It took them almost five months to reach Virginia!

If a voyage took longer than anticipated, supplies easily could be depleted before arrival. Ships often had to make scheduled and unscheduled stops along their routes to stock up. In extreme cases, when ships became stuck at sea without wind and were unable to resupply, people died from the lack of fresh water and food.



Yet unfavorable winds were not the worst that could happen — storms and hurricanes frequently scattered and wrecked ships. Nearly every voyage experienced bad weather, which could throw vessels hundreds of miles off course, run them aground, or sink them.

Even with good weather, traveling was difficult. Conditions were cramped, and diseases spread quickly. Passengers shared space with livestock that were brought along to supply food on the voyage, as well as to stock farms in the New World. The first ships to land at Jamestown had chickens aboard; later expeditions sailed with hogs, goats, pigeons, cows, and other animals. Imagine sharing living space for six months with that crowd!